

Association of Ideas and Medicine of the Mind in Locke's *Conduct of the Understanding*

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Abstract: The *Conduct of the Understanding* was written by Locke to therapeutically counterweight some negative epistemic aspects which already emerged in the final chapters of Book IV of the *Essay*. The order of this treatment reflects both the Aristotelian *Organon*, concluded by the *Sophistici elenchi*, and some modern scholastic manuals of logic. The *Conduct* was conceived to prevent or cure the errors of the intellect (*medicina mentis*), because the logic used so far was inadequate, as Bacon already saw. From a logical point of view, *knowledge* is idea-containment, *opinion* is idea conjunction without containment, and *error* is idea association, i.e. a connection of ideas wholly owing to chance or custom. Associations of ideas, although naturalized by the habitual action of the mind, remain unnatural in themselves since their connections have no real basis: Locke calls the association of ideas "madness". To prevent associations of ideas that have not yet occurred, Locke proposes 'meditation' upon a basic epistemic rule, while to cure associations of ideas that have already occurred, he proposes voluntary reflective 'attention' upon the habitual movements of the mind.

Keywords: Locke, medicine of the mind, association of ideas, attention

1. *Conduct of the understanding and medicine of the mind*

From what can be ascertained, John Locke's writing *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* was mentioned for the first time in a letter to William Molineux, dated the 10th of April 1697:

I have lately got a little leisure to think of some additions to my book, against the next edition, and within a few days have fallen upon a subject that I know not how far it will lead me. I have written several pages on it, but the matter, the farther I go, opens the more upon me, and I cannot yet get sight of any end of it. The title of the chapter will be *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, which, if

I shall pursue, as far as I imagine it will reach, and as it deserves, will, I conclude, make the largest chapter of my Essay.¹

The “next edition” of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* that the author here has in mind is the fourth, which would be published in London two and a half years later, in early December of 1699 (although the title page says 1700). From this letter we also learn that the text, under Locke’s hand, is taking the proper form of a “chapter”, for which reason he foresees it as a considerable addition to the *Essay*.² While yet difficult to measure, given the amplitude of his insights on the matter, these might lead one to presume that it could become the largest chapter yet. Indeed, the manuscript currently catalogued at the Bodleian Library as MS Locke c.1 contains several writings identified as additions to the *Essay*.³ There, under the section titled, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, we find a clear indication of its intended position, “B[ook]: IV C[hapter]: XX”,³ just before the final chapter, *Of the Division of the Sciences*, and after the chapter *Of wrong Assent, or Errour*, which had been Chapter 19 until the third edition.⁴

This proposed location never came to be, for the *Conduct of the Understanding* would receive such a lengthy thematic development as to render it an autonomous work altogether, so that Locke never even managed to complete or publish it. This is noteworthy, however, because it would seem to indicate that the *Conduct* from its very conception represented the author’s intention to provide a therapeutic counterweight for some of the negative or problematic epistemic aspects which had emerged in the abovementioned chapter *Of wrong Assent, or Errour*, also to which *Of Enthusiasm* was added right before it in the fourth edition.

Drawing a comparison with the closing chapters of Books II and III, a noticeable symmetry appears. Book III ends with Chapter 11, *Of the Remedies of the foregoing Imperfections and Abuses*; the abuses which are in need of remedy are obviously those indicated in the previous Chapter 10, *Of the Abuse of Words*. Likewise, Book II is enriched with a final 33rd chapter in the fourth edition, namely that *Of the Association of Ideas*.

¹ Locke to William Molyneux, 10 April 1697, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, p. 87.

² The other manuscript containing the texts of the *Conduct* is the MS Locke c.28. For an ample description of these manuscripts see Schuurman, “Introduction”, in Locke, *Conduct*, pp. 98-106.

³ MS Locke c.1, p. 62; Locke, *Conduct*, p. 153.

⁴ Until the third edition, the chapters of Book IV totaled twenty. The fourth edition added Chapter 19, *Of Enthusiasm*, which moved the numeration of the last two chapters to 20 and 21.

Bk II	Bk III	Bk IV
29. Of clear and distinct, <i>obscure and confused</i> Ideas		
30. Of real and <i>fantastical</i> Ideas		
31. Of adequate and <i>inadequate</i> Ideas	9. Of the <i>Imperfection</i> of Words.	19. Of <i>Enthusiasm</i>
32. Of true and <i>false</i> Ideas	10. Of the <i>Abuse</i> of Words	20. Of <i>wrong</i> Assent, or <i>Error</i>
33. Of the <i>Association</i> of Ideas	11. Of the Remedies of the foregoing <i>Imperfections</i> and <i>Abuses</i>	[20. Of the <i>Conduct</i> of the <i>Understanding</i>]

The final chapter was initially projected as a possible addition to the Latin translation together with *Of Enthusiasm*, as conveyed by a letter to Molyneux on the 26th of April 1695:

What I shall add concerning Enthusiasm, I guess, will very much agree with your thoughts, since yours jump so right with mine, about the place where it is to come in, I having designed it for *chap. 18. lib. IV.* as a false principle of reasoning often made use of. [...] I think I shall make some other additions to be put into your Latin translation, and particularly concerning the Connexion of Ideas, which has not, that I know, been hitherto considered, and has, I guess, a greater influence upon our minds than is usually taken notice of.⁵

Of course, John Locke's *De intellectu humano* appeared only in 1701 with the other two projected chapters having debuted the previous year in the fourth edition of the *Essay*. Now, keeping in mind that the third edition saw no additional content, the first new material since the second edition of 1694 debuted in the fourth edition.

To recapitulate, during the six years stretching between the second and fourth editions, Locke proposed to make three additions: in 1695 *Enthusiasm* and *Association of Ideas*, in which diagnostics of some pathologies of the minds is proposed; in 1697 the *Conduct of the Understanding*, which also aims to offer therapeutic. Obviously, with these three, we should mention a fourth addition in that critique Locke had gradually been articulating about Malebranche's notion of seeing all things in God.⁶ Although in some way thematically tied

⁵ Locke to Molyneux, 26 April 1695, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, pp. 352-53.

⁶ Previously, in Locke to William Molyneux, 23 March 1693, in Locke, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, p. 665, and thereafter in Locke to William Molyneux, 8 March 1695, *ibid.*, vol 5, p. 387, Locke had communicated to his friend the idea of adding to the *Essay* something about "P. Malbranche's opi-

to the other additions, this text remained distinct because of its polemical nature, in turn rendering it less suitable for inclusion in the *Essay*. The first two additions would effectively come to light in the fourth edition while the last would instead remain an unpolished rough-draft, only to be published in the *Posthumous Works of Mr. John Locke* in 1706. Furthermore, the effective or intended position of these chapters was, in either case, at the end of Book II or Book IV where, as we have seen in relation to Book III, Locke was inclined to expand the argument to include negative or problematic aspects as well as their possible remedies. From this perspective, the *Conduct of the Understanding* fits into a wider strategy, marking Locke's growing interest in the remedies that his philosophy might offer to the problems raised by language, religious belief and assent in general.

In each cases, the treatment of mental pathologies or of its possible remedies is placed at the end of the related books. This fact in my view would seem to indicate a classical structure, at least as regards the Aristotelian *Organon* where the collection notably concludes with the *Sophistici elenchi*. As Aristotle himself would say, the *Sophistici elenchi* are a follow-up to the *Topica*, to the extent that some manuscripts place these as Book IX of that work, so as to form an articulated treatise of dialectic with them. The specific objective of the work is well synthesized by Pseudo-Alexander: "in the present book, so as to offer us a remedy able to ward-off the sophistic maladies, [Aristotle] examines the sophistic syllogism, making a strong rebuttal of the sophistic argument, in this, striving as far as possible for truth, on whose behalf the charlatan's cheap fallacies and widely held presumptions are disproven".⁷ A case in point, as Paul Schuurman has amply demonstrated,⁸ is that the general framework of the *Essay* – save the first book whose character more resembles that of a premise than that of an actual treatise – is symmetrical to the main parts of the Aristotelian *Organon*, which were coincidentally maintained by modern scholastics in the textbooks of Logic, as elsewhere. For example, the *Manuductio ad logicam, sive dialectica* (1615) by the Jesuit Philippe du Trieu (1580-1645) was among the textbooks in use at Oxford during the time Locke studied there, likewise, to be found among

nion concerning seeing all things in God". However, doubts about the polemical nature of such a text prompted Locke to desist from his intention although this transcript would also come to light in the *Posthumous Works* under the title, *An Examination of P. Malbranche's opinion concerning seeing all things in God*. See Simonutti, *Malebranche e la visione in Dio*, pp. 7-23.

⁷ Alexander Aphrodisiensis, *In Sophisticos Elenchos*, 2, 6-10 [my translation].

⁸ See Schuurman, "Introduction", in Locke, *Conduct*, pp. 52-60.

the volumes of the philosopher's personal library.⁹ A small table may help visualize this structural correspondence:

Organon	Manuductio	Essay
<i>Categoriae</i>	<i>De termino simplici</i>	II <i>Of Ideas</i>
<i>De interpretatione</i>	<i>De enuntiatione</i>	III <i>Of Words</i>
<i>Analytica</i>	<i>De syllogismo</i>	IV <i>Of Knowledge and</i>
<i>Topica</i>	<i>De locis dialecticis</i>	<i>Opinion</i>
<i>Sophistici elenchi</i>	<i>sophisticis</i>	<i>Of Conduct Understanding</i>

The last two arguments dealt with in the *Essay*, namely *Knowledge* and *Opinion*, plus the anticipated final chapter of the *Conduct*, correspond to the three types of syllogism classically treated by Aristotelian logic: *certain*, *probable*, and *sophistic*. These last two, are confronted by Du Trieu as two halves dividing the fourth treatise *De locis*, i.e., *De locis dialecticis* and *De locis sophisticis*, and correspond respectively to Aristotle's *Topica* and *Sophistici elenchi*.

The evidence that Locke conceived the *Conduct of the Understanding* within the sphere of remedies for the errors of the intellect is confirmed not only by its placement in the argumentative strategy of the *Essay* – as we have just shown – but also by the text's opening remarks delineating its scope and content. Locke himself begins to explain why it is so important to deliberate upon the correct use of the intellect. Indeed, man acts guided by the intellect and not by the will, in as much as the latter, “never fails in its obedience to the dictates of the understanding”,¹⁰ seeing as how “the Ideas and images in mens minds are the invisible powers that constantly governe them”.¹¹ The problem is, however, that we forfeit an adequate discipline for the conduct of the intellect from the very moment that the logic being employed appears to be deficient: “The Logick now in use has [...] long possessed the chair as the only art taught in the Schools for the direction of the minde in the study of the Arts and sciences”.¹²

To show the inadequacy of scholastic logic, used for centuries by scholars as the direct heir of Aristotelian logic, Locke now turns to the authority of the Great Lord Verulam, quoting a passage from the *Praefatio* to the *Instauratio magna pars secunda Novum organum*:

⁹ LL, no. 2982.

¹⁰ Locke, *Conduct*, par. 1, p. 153.

¹¹ Ibid., par. 1, p. 154.

¹² Ibid., par. 2, p. 154.

Qui summas Dialecticæ partes tribuerunt atque inde fidissima Scientiis præsidia comparari putarunt verissime et optime viderunt intellectum humanum sibi permissum merito suspectum esse debere. Verum infirmior omnino est malo medicina; nec ipsa mali expers. Si quidem Dialectica, quæ recepta est, licet ad civilia et artes, quæ in sermone et opinione positæ sunt, rectissime adhibeatur; naturæ tamen subtilitatem longo intervallo non attingit, et prensando, quod non capit, ad errores potius stabiliendos et quasi figendos, quam ad viam veritati aperiendam valuit.

This is a text for which Locke himself provides an English translation, including an additional verse from the *Praefatio*, which can be found at the end of the paragraph following the one quoted above:¹³

They says he who attributed soe much to Logick perceived very well and truly that it was not safe to trust the understanding to it self without the guard of any rules. But the remedy reachd not the evil but became a part of it. For the Logick which tooke place though it might doe well enough in civil affairs and the Arts which consisted in talke and opinion, yet comes very far short of the subtilty in the reall performances of nature and catching at what it cannot reach has served to confirme and establish errors rather than to open a way to truth. And therefor a little after he says. That it is absolutely necessary that a better and perfecter use and imployment of the minde and understanding should be introduced. Necessario requiritur ut melior et perfectior mentis et intellectus humani usus et adoperatio introducatur.

Given that the Latin text differs in only a few details of punctuation from the original, what stands out about this translation is that it is the only extensive quote in the *Conduct* and also that Locke took it upon himself to translate the passage into English, evidently to favor a wider audience than the strictly academic one. The first thing to take note of is that Locke translates *Dialectica* with *Logick*. Years later in 1733, this same choice was made by the first English translator¹⁴ and appears quite sensible based on what we have previously said about the attention given to the dialectic in the modern scholastic textbooks. In this sense, the title given by Du Trieu is exemplary, *Manuductio*

¹³ The first section “[At] Qui summas [...] aperiendam valuit” is found in Bacon, *The Instauration magna Part II*, p. 18; the second section “[Antequam vero ad remotiora, et occultiora Naturae liceat appellere,] Necessario [...] introducatur”, *ibid.*, p. 20. In Locke’s library there are two editions of the *Novum organum*, both in Latin, see LL, no. 169 and 170.

¹⁴ See Bacon, *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*. The previous English translations of the *Novum organum* were incomplete.

ad logicam, sive dialectica.¹⁵ The second thing worthy of note is the fact that Locke understands *intellectum humanum sibi permissum* to mean the *human intellect left to itself*. So, not so much as the intellect left without any aid, but rather – in a more juridical sense – as confiding in the sole intellect without any proper safekeeping of the rules of logic to corroborate its testimony. This is further suggested by the fact that Locke's translation omits the phrase *atque inde fidissima Scientiis praesidia comparari putarunt*, which again identifies those who have assigned very high functions to logic or dialectics, and do so "believing that it furnished the most trustworthy aid to the sciences".¹⁶

With respect to the content of the two excerpts taken from the *Praefatio* of the *Instauratio Magna*, Locke's principal objective consists in coming to the realization that logic has long been considered the best remedy for the errors of the intellect and yet, "the remedy reachd not the evil but became a part of it".¹⁷ This is a rather loose rendition of the Latin *Verum infirmior omnino est malo medicina; nec ipsa mali expers*, which can be translated literally as: "Truly, the medicine is altogether worse than the ailment; nor even free from disease itself". For this very reason it becomes absolutely necessary to introduce "a better and perfecter use and imployment of the minde and understanding".¹⁸

In the following paragraph of the *Conduct*, with the marginal title "Parts", Locke is still more explicit about the nature of his writing. The paragraph is introduced by a pair of statements that carry a slightly anti-cartesian air. The opening line, "There is tis visible great variety in mens understandings",¹⁹ seems to contrast another famous opening line, "Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée".²⁰ Likewise, the notion that "A few rules of Logick are thought sufficient in this case for those who pretend to the highest improvement"²¹ is a clear echo of the Cartesian belief, "au lieu de ce grand nombre de préceptes dont la logique est composée, je crus que j'aurais assez des quatre suivants".²² Yet, Locke would beg to differ that, "there are a great many natural defects in the understanding capable of amendment which are over looked and wholly neglected".

¹⁵ In the *Ad lectorem* that opens Du Trieu's work, the author specifically justifies the option to join the term *dialectica* to *logica*.

¹⁶ Bacon, *The Instauratio magna Part II*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Locke, *Conduct*, par. 3, p. 155.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., par. 4, p. 155.

²⁰ Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, AT VI 1.

²¹ Locke, *Conduct*, par. 5, p. 156.

²² Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, AT VI 18.

Locke would hereafter add two more phrases to the paragraph. The first, fully aligned with what precedes, concludes that, "it is easy to perceive that men are guilty of a great many faults in the exercise and improvement of this facultie of the minde which hinders them in their progresse and keeps them in ignorance and error all their lives".²³ In the next instance he further specifies, "Some of them [errors] I shall take notice of and endeavour to point out proper remedies for in the following Chapters".²⁴ The philosopher's underlying idea is thus the following: human intellect by its own nature is affected by a series of multiple defects. These defects limit the development of the human faculties, impeding them to reach the perfection to which they might have aspired had they not been snared by multiple errors. One of the determining factors in this failed development is the fact that the very nature of such defects renders them altogether unobserved to the mind, making them very difficult to correct. Herein the dual scope of the *Conduct* is subsequently deduced: first to evidence what these errors are and then to indicate possible remedies for them. These initial indications, validated by the lengthy citation of Bacon, clearly place the *Conduct of the Understanding* within the tradition that sees philosophy as *medicina mentis*.²⁵ I will insist no further on this aspect already featured by Sorana Corneanu in her work on the *Regimens of the mind*.

The manuscript of the *Conduct* has reached us in an advanced redactional state, albeit unfinished and much less ready for publication in the *Essay* or as an independent work. From this germination, it appears a rather disorganized and heterogeneous catalogue, detailing the errors of the intellect and their possible remedies. In this sense, the best way to grasp the text's internal coherence – given what we have just gleaned from its first two paragraphs – is to herein identify a novel approach.

On one hand, its logic is novel because it seeks to leave behind the useless subtleties of scholastic syllogistics, being that, to some extent, this suffers from the same defects that it would like to emend. As evidenced by the Baconian

²³ Locke's addition in MS Locke c. 28 f. 123r at the end of Chapter 1; Schuurman, "Introduction", in Locke, *Conduct*, p. 105.

²⁴ Locke's hand addition in MS Locke c. 28 f. 123r not in MS Locke c.1. Schuurman points out that Peter King decided to include this sentence in the *Posthumous works* (1706) but since he had not ordered the material of MS Locke c.1 into chapters, he substituted the word 'Discourse' for 'Chapters', see Schuurman, "Introduction", in Locke, *Conduct*, pp. 117-18.

²⁵ See Corneanu, Giglioni, and Jalobeanu (eds.), *Francis Bacon and the Medicine of the Mind*; Giglioni, "Medicine of the Mind in Early Modern Philosophy".

quote, the old logic was heavily centered on verbal dispute and, as such, remained useful only for the persuasive transmission of knowledge. It was however incapable of penetrating into the *subtilitas naturae*, or as Locke would phrase the Baconian philosopheme, "the subtilty in the reall performances of nature".²⁶ This introduces both the concept of *reality* and that of the *actions* or *powers* of nature in an exceedingly novel and meaningful way.²⁷

On the other hand, this logic is novel because it is a logic of ideas. As Locke himself claims at the beginning of MS Locke c.28 f. 125r,²⁸ the errors of the intellect are fundamentally of two species: "the want of determined Ideas and of Sagacity and exercise in finding out and laying in order intermediate Ideas". Both of these errors are therefore attributed to ideas: as taken in themselves, on account of a lack of clarity and distinction in their conception, or as taken in relation to other ideas, on account of a lack of the intermediate ideas that serve to associate chains of reasoning when concordance is not self-evident. We err in the conception of ideas in as much as we accept opaque ideas as clear and confused ideas as distinct; we err in reasoning when we admit as intermediates certain ideas that are unable to truly mediate between the ideas that we seek to unite.

In the section of the *Conduct* where the title "Association"²⁹ is found in the margin, Locke describes the phenomenon of the association of ideas as follows:

By this one easy and unheeded miscariage of the understanding sandie and loose foundations become infallible principles and will not suffer them selves to be touchd or questiond. Such unnatural connections become by custom as natural to the minde, as sun and light, fire and warmth goe together and soe seem to carry with them as natural an evidence as self evident truths themselves.³⁰

Locke, first of all, underlines that association is a defect by which the mind is spontaneously and unknowingly, that is habitually, carried in the manner of a second nature as it were. The ease with which the mind tends to associate ideas makes it increasingly difficult, not only to notice but moreover to revise such associations. These links, seemingly natural to the functioning of the mind,

²⁶ Locke, *Conduct*, par. 3, p. 155.

²⁷ The rare occurrences of the term 'performance' in the *Essay* each have to do with the *fulfillment* of an action.

²⁸ This is Locke, *Conduct*, par. 98, p. 245.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, par. 76, p. 228.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, par. 77, p. 229.

grown accustomed to them, yet objectively remain wholly unnatural since they are connections lacking any real foundation in things. Now I would specifically like to detail said 'association of ideas' and show its peculiarity within the Lockean logic of ideas.

2. *Association of ideas and logic of ideas*

As I mentioned earlier, in 1695 the "Connexion of Ideas" was flagged by Locke among the questions worthy of expansion, anticipating the Latin translation of the *Essay*. The chronology of redaction for the manuscript MS Locke e.1 shows that Locke began work on *Enthusiasm*, then moved to *Association* and finally to the *Conduct*. The three developments are closely related and, in a certain sense, represent one of Locke's common concerns as viewed under three different perspectives. The keystone – this is the point I would like to defend – is *Association*, which represents the epistemic core of the problem, with respect to which *Enthusiasm* constitutes an eminent case in religious matters while the *Conduct* concerns the therapeutic sphere.

These three developments are thus intertwined not only historically and thematically but even textually. Specifically, the manuscript on "Association" would be split in two so that one part ended up in the *Essay* and the other in the *Conduct*. In MS Locke e.1, the part on "Association" begins on page 32 and ends on page 56. The first twenty pages (32-52) were then used by Locke as Chapter 33 of the *Essay*, while the remaining part (52-56) was placed in the *Conduct*.³¹ I prefer to start with the latter text, and then move to the *Essay*.

The opening line of the section titled, "Association" in the *Conduct* is very interesting because it would outline a differing treatment with respect to the *Essay*, assuming they are two separate works published at different times:

Though I have in the 2^d book of My *Essay concerning humane understanding* treated of the *Association of Ideas* yet havinge donne it there historically as givinge a view of the understanding in this as well as its several other ways of operateing rather than designeing there to enquire into the remedies ought to be applied to it, [...].

³¹ Ibid., pars. 76-79, pp. 228-31.

The reason why the original manuscript was partitioned thus pertains to the two different objectives sought in the two texts, although their parts flow together. In the *Essay* the treatment of the association of ideas has a nature that follows the "Historical, plain method"³² preferred for that work. This method would be inspired by Baconian natural history and a medical methodology of the historical kind, as derived from the careful observation and documentation of symptoms.³³ In other words, with the *Essay* Locke offers us the 'diagnosis' of the association of ideas while the *Conduct* try to find a 'therapy', a "cure" in Locke's own words.

The text continues specifying that in lieu of this curative purpose, Locke will propose a few elements for consideration to all those who desire to conduce their own intellect properly. The primary reason it is worthwhile to do so is that:

[Association of Ideas] is as frequent a cause of mistake and error in us as perhaps any thing else that can be named, and is a disease of the mind as hard to be cured as any. It being a very hard thing to convince any one that things are not soe, and naturaly soe as they constantly appear to him.³⁴

Therefore, Locke places the association of ideas as the most frequent and incurable of errors. Now, the indispensable question that should here be asked is what Locke means by the expression 'association of ideas' and also why he apparently attributes a negative value to it. For the mere fact that the mind would associate ideas does not seem to be a pathological phenomenon in and of itself. Indeed, the history of thought and of psychology has recognized Locke as one of the pioneers of 'Associationism', i.e., "the doctrine according to which mental activity is primarily or essentially comprised of the association of ideas in chains of ideas according to certain laws".³⁵ It is no coincidence that in his *Introduction* to the *Conduct*, Paul Schuurman is careful to add to the expression 'association of ideas' the qualification 'wrong',³⁶ yielding to the existence of a 'good' association of ideas and a 'wrong' association of ideas.

³² Locke, *Essay*, I.i.2, p. 44.

³³ See Brun, "La Méthode simple et historique de Locke dans l'*Essai* et la *Royal Society*".

³⁴ Locke, *Conduct*, par. 76, p. 228.

³⁵ Dromelet, Tabb, and Wolfe, "Doctrines of the Association of Ideas in Early Modern Thought", 490; see also Warren, *A History of the Association Psychology*; Young, "Association of Ideas"; Rapaport, *The History of the Concept of Association of Ideas*; Giuntini, *La chimica della mente*.

³⁶ See Schuurman, "Introduction", in Locke, *Conduct*, pp. 29, 30, 32, 48, 51, 95, 120.

Yet, if we closely examine the texts, Locke never uses the expression 'wrong association of ideas,' either in the *Conduct* or in the *Essay* where Locke speaks rather of "wrong connexion of ideas".³⁷ In the *Essay*, in fact, the term 'association' occurs only in Chapter 33 of Book II and in no other part of the text.³⁸ As such, Schuurman's auxiliary qualification seems somewhat inappropriate to me, because to Locke the term 'association' carried a negative connotation in and of itself. In other words, for Locke to say 'association of ideas' meant 'wrong connection of ideas'. According to Kathryn Tabb, in a recent article dedicated to enthusiasm and association of ideas, "Locke was invoking the early modern signification of 'association' as an ominous confederacy or union".³⁹ Therefore, for Locke there is no such thing as a wrong association of ideas because the very act of associating ideas is what in itself leads to error. Although historically Locke coined the expression "association of ideas," its meaning is quite different from what it will take on in later authors, such as David Hume.⁴⁰

To better explain the peculiarity of the association of ideas according to Locke, an in-depth examination of the logic proper to ideas as they relate to distinct typologies of knowledge becomes indispensable. For this task I will rely on the analysis of Matthew Priselac, from his work on *Locke's Science of Knowledge*. Priselac's strategy is based upon an analysis of the epistemological theory contained in the *Essay*, thanks to which he finally strives to explain the relationship that ties what is at stake in Part II of the work, namely the origin and taxonomy of ideas, with that which is treated in Part IV, namely the distinction of knowledge from opinion. Priselac's underlying thesis is that: "Locke's project in the *Essay* is to provide an account of knowledge and opinion that explains their boundaries and limitations by examining the origins of our thought".⁴¹ Even from the first lines of the *Essay*, the definition of the origin, nature and extension of knowledge remains an objective closely tied to the inquiry relative to opinion: "This, therefore, being my *Purpose* to enquire into the Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge; together, with the Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent".⁴² Indeed, the

³⁷ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.9, p. 397; "undue Connexion of Ideas", *ibid.*, II.xxxiii.8, p. 397; "customary connexion [of Ideas]", *ibid.*, II.xxxiii.18, p. 401.

³⁸ The term 'association', apart from the title of the chapter and of few paragraphs (7, 14, 18), occurs only one time in Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.7, p. 396.

³⁹ Tabb, "Locke on Enthusiasm and the Association of Ideas", p. 77.

⁴⁰ Dromelet, Tabb, and Wolfe, "Doctrines of the Association of Ideas in Early Modern Thought", pp. 493-94.

⁴¹ Priselac, *Locke's Science of Knowledge*, p. 7.

⁴² Locke, *Essay*, I.i.2, p. 43.

justification of this difference between knowledge and opinion turns out to be the result and, at times, the dominant scope of the *Essay*: "It is therefore worth while, to search out the *Bounds* between Opinion and Knowledge; and examine by what Measures, in things, whereof we have no certain Knowledge, we ought to regulate our Assent, and moderate our Perswasions".⁴³ Thus, to adequately explain how the genetic inquiry of the origin of knowledge might be at the base of its distinction from opinion requires providing a fully organic account of the *Essay*.

The solution around which Priselac's attempt spins is, by vast synthesis, the following. Locke's project in the *Essay* is to provide an explanation of the nature of knowledge and of opinion, as well as of the limits that separate them, by way of examining the origin of ideas. Knowledge and opinion differ from one another on the grounds of being 'distinct genetic structures'. The genetic structure of Knowledge reveals that this is a perception of 'idea-containment': "One idea contains another when it is, at least in part, composed of and so has as a part, another idea. We have knowledge when we perceive an idea to contain another".⁴⁴ Opinion is instead 'conjunction without containment': "Ideas are conjoined without being contained when they are both parts of some third idea but neither contains the other as a part. We have mere opinion when we merely conjoin two ideas but don't perceive one to contain the other".⁴⁵ For example, let's take the idea of a particular substance. It concerns a complex substance idea, composed of the idea of a substrate – a substance_{support} in Priselac's terminology – and of ideas about its qualities, visible, tactile, *etc.* While the idea of that particular substance contains all of these ideas within it, these ideas do not reciprocally contain each other, but are joined together in as much as they pertain to a third idea, precisely that of the particular substance. Therefore, I perceive that this particular thing possesses this or that quality, while I can only presume, without perceiving it, the type of relationship subsistent between the qualities of the substance_{support} or between single, different qualities. The limits of my paper do not allow for further analysis of the ample and detailed argumentation with which Priselac defends his thesis; for this, I defer to his work. Instead, I prefer to take into account the association of ideas, an aspect Priselac does not consider for a very straightforward reason, because the association of ideas does not constitute a kind of knowledge, either certain or probable.

⁴³ Locke, *Essay*, I.i.3, p. 44.

⁴⁴ Priselac, *Locke's Science of Knowledge*, p. 85.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Of course, while it is all too evident that Locke conceives the *Essay*, from its first chapters, as an explanation of the difference between knowledge and opinion,⁴⁶ only at a later moment it seems does he take note of the demand to further specify a third aspect concerning error. As a result, according to the classic tripartition which we spoke of at the beginning, three objects of logic emerge: knowledge or certainty, opinion or probability, and error or falsity. Knowledge according to Locke could be intuitive or demonstrative and also sensitive, i.e., knowledge of the real existence of particular things.⁴⁷ We can err in our opinions but also sometimes in intuitions or in demonstrations and obviously in knowledge of the real existence.

Although it may be quite natural to assimilate 'idea conjunction' and 'idea association',⁴⁸ I argue that they should be carefully distinguished from each other. Indeed, opinion differs from knowledge in that it is 'presumption' to know in the literal sense of the term:

Thus the Mind has two Faculties, conversant about Truth and Falshood. *First, Knowledge*, whereby it certainly perceives, and is undoubtedly satisfied of the Agreement or Disagreement of any Ideas. *Secondly, Judgment*, which is the putting *Ideas* together, or separating them from one another in the Mind, when their certain Agreement or Disagreement is not perceived, but *presumed* to be so; which is, as the Word imports, taken to be so before it certainly appears.⁴⁹

From this point of view, the association of ideas cannot be considered as merely presuming to know, because Locke effectively treats association as a genuine form of madness: "enquiring a little by the bye into the Nature of Madness, *B.2. c.11. § 13*. I found it to spring from the very same Root, and to depend on the very same Cause we are here speaking of",⁵⁰ i.e., association of ideas. This certainly cannot be said of opinion, which under Locke's judgement is the faculty that we are most often constrained to use in the

⁴⁶ See Priselac, "Locke on Knowledge and Opinion".

⁴⁷ "I think, we may add to the two former sorts of *Knowledge*, this also, of the existence of particular external Objects, by that perception and Consciousness we have of the actual entrance of Ideas from them, and allow these *three degrees of Knowledge*, viz. *Intuitive, Demonstrative, and Sensitive*: in each of which, there are different degrees and ways of Evidence and Certainty" (Locke, *Essay*, IV.i.14, pp. 537-38).

⁴⁸ As Priselac does in this passage: "It is a conjunction, or association, between two ideas" (Priselac, *Locke's Science of Knowledge*, p. 139).

⁴⁹ Locke, *Essay*, IV.xiv.4, p. 653.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, II.xxxiii.4, p. 395.

state of twilight and probationership in which we find ourselves during this earthly life.⁵¹

The association of ideas is to be placed in contrast with knowledge and particularly with real knowledge. In fact, initially Locke's analysis of the association of ideas assumes natural or real connections as a proper term of comparison:

Some of our Ideas have a natural Correspondence and Connexion one with another: It is the Office and Excellency of our Reason to trace these, and hold them together in that Union and Correspondence which is founded in their peculiar Beings.⁵²

The association of ideas is therefore defined in opposition to natural or real connection as casual or customary, meaning not due to nature but to that which is often called second nature, in this case implying that this second nature is not in accord with nature:⁵³

Besides this there is another Connexion of Ideas wholly owing to Chance or Custom; Ideas that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds, that 'tis very hard to separate them, they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang always inseparable shew themselves together.⁵⁴

Therefore, the association of ideas concerns ideas "that in themselves are not at all of kin", meaning, whose nature or "peculiar being" does not cause them of their own right to be contained the one in the other (as in knowledge), nor to be conjoined without containment (as in opinion), but to some extent to be contained without containment, that is, to be connected to each other as closely as if their link were natural or real, without effectively being so.

It is for this reason that Locke does not hesitate to define the association of ideas as madness, and not metaphorically – as we have seen – but quite literally. In general, a "strong Combination of Ideas"⁵⁵ can have a double origin,

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, IV.xiv.2, p. 652.

⁵² *Ibid.*, II.xxxiii.5, p. 395.

⁵³ "Such unnatural connections become by custom as natural to the minde, as sun and light, fire and warmth goe together and soe seem to carry with them as natural an evidence as self evident truths themselves" (Locke, *Conduct*, par. 77, p. 229). On the relationship between habit and association see, Tabb, "Locke on Habituation and the Association of Ideas".

⁵⁴ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.5, p. 395.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, II.xxxiii.6, p. 396.

“either voluntarily, or by chance”.⁵⁶ Voluntarily when the combination is fruit of a specific training, acted out by the subject (e.g., a musician or a dancer); casual when a chance event – often traumatic in the examples Locke chose – or a series of unanticipated circumstances is the cause of the connection (e.g., an aversion or nausea). But more than anything, Locke aims to underline the typical unreality of associations, as in this most eloquent example:

The Ideas of *Goblins* and *Sprights* have really no more to do with Darkness than Light; yet let but a foolish Maid inculcate these often on the Mind of a Child, and raise them there together, possibly he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he lives, but Darkness shall ever afterwards bring with it those frightful Ideas, and they shall be so joined that he can no more bear the one than the other.⁵⁷

There are three interesting elements here. First of all, the madness of the connection between fantastical ideas and real ideas. Secondly, the all too fragile role of childhood as a time prone for generating such associations. Lastly, the difficulty, if not impossibility, of remedying such associations once they are established in the mind. I would like to attempt to analyze somewhat further each of these three elements. Madness does not have so much to do with the existence of fantastical ideas, whose distinction from real ideas was elaborated in Chapter 30, but rather with the fact that ‘fantastical’ ideas would be so closely tied with ‘real’ ideas, thus producing an erred connection, namely, an association. Childhood evidences another element in the weakness or ‘passivity’ of the mind. Association happening in our minds is something that we undergo like an illness, and like an illness it should be cured. Yet Locke, in the *Conduct* as in the *Essay*, is extremely skeptical towards the real possibility of remedying the association of ideas.

3. *Remedies to cure the association of ideas*

In the *Essay*, the therapeutical difficulty concerning the association of ideas is traced back to one very simple reason, namely, that in the case of association the mind would be asked to cure itself by itself: “When this Combination is settled and whilst it lasts, it is not in the power of Reason to help us, and

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., II.xxxiii.10, pp. 397-98.

relieve us from the Effects of it".⁵⁸ This is because reasoning is incapable of influencing a connection that has occurred independently from it. Thus, only time seems to provide a remedy through the forgetfulness which it generally ushers in. Therefore, the Lockean argument in the *Essay* seems aimed primarily at emphasizing how dangerous it is to inculcate false connections of ideas into someone's mind since these are almost irreversible. This argument appears to be addressed to educators or in general to those who have a role in shaping minds.

In the *Conduct*, Locke is more explicitly set on finding possible remedies for the association of ideas: "And where then shall one with hopes of successes begin the cure?".⁵⁹ On the one hand, there are the remedies to association before it occurs (prophylaxis), and, on the other, the remedies to association after it has occurred (therapy or cure). Regarding the first, they more resemble a set of precautions: Locke's proposal might well be summarized by the precept, 'prevention is better than cure'. Indeed, the first preventative remedy for the association of ideas regards those who mislead the minds of others, impeding them to be free to reason. They are the heads of numerous sects, political or religious, who base their power on an authority that will not allow itself to be brought into question. They deliberately hide the truth and, as such, Locke places them into stark contrast with those who seek the truth:

they [teachers and Guides in most sects] will not suffer the grounds where on they are built to be examined, when as those who seek truth only and desire to own and propagate noe thing else freely expose their principles to the test, are pleased to have them examined, give men leave to reject them if they can [...].⁶⁰

This preventative remedy extends also to parents and educators in general, whom Locke counsels against "principleing their children and Schollers well".⁶¹ Finally, Locke turns to the persons who, in contrast with those who are constrained to dedicate their lives to satisfying the most basic personal needs, have instead time to dedicate to study and to the search for truth. For such as these, the philosopher concedes a single principle that should be "inculcated" in the mind by constant repetition, effectively forming a preventative rule,

⁵⁸ Ibid., II.xxxiii.13, p. 398.

⁵⁹ Locke, *Conduct*, par. 77, p. 229.

⁶⁰ Ibid., par. 77, pp. 229-30.

⁶¹ Ibid., par. 78, p. 230.

literally a “caution against this evil”,⁶² a rule that is like a ‘medicine’ that serves to ‘immunize’ the mind from the occurrence of an association of ideas:

That they never suffer any Ideas to be joynd in their understandings in any other or stronger combination than what their own nature and correspondence give them. And that they often examin those that they finde linked together in their minds, whether this assotiation of Ideas be from the visible agreement that is in the Ideas them selves or from the habitual and prevaileing custom of the minde joyning them thus together in thinking.⁶³

Locke suggests here the use of a mental technique, i.e., meditation or examination, that recalls the philosophical spiritual exercises typically practiced in ancient schools, especially the Stoics and Epicureans, as Pierre Hadot has pointed out in numerous studies.⁶⁴ the philosopher is called upon to care for (*melete*) a series of principles (*logoi*), which, once repeated and assimilated, go to form that “rule of life” (*kanon*) by which the soul is fortified and prepared, as by an “armor” (*paraskeue*), enabling him to react in the face of difficulties.⁶⁵ On closer inspection, the rule Locke proposes here echoes the first of the precepts in Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method*: “Le premier était de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle”.⁶⁶ In Locke’s theory, the Cartesian criterion of evidence becomes that combination of ideas which is due to their very nature, or as we have seen, an ‘idea containment’.

Locke also foresees the possibility of intervening after association has taken place in the mind: “cure it [association] when habit has establishd it”.⁶⁷ In this case, the therapy proposed by the philosopher is as follows: he who would like to cure an association of ideas that occurs in his mind “must nicely observe the very quick and almost imperceptible motions of the minde in its habitual actions”.⁶⁸ In support of this therapeutic proposal Locke refers to what he argued in the *Essay* about the so-called ‘Molineux problem’. In *Essay* II.ix.8,

⁶² Ibid., par. 79, p. 230.

⁶³ Ibid., par. 78, p. 230.

⁶⁴ See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 81-125; Hadot, *The Selected Writings*, pp. 207-26.

⁶⁵ See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 85; Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 319-27; Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, pp. 35-53.

⁶⁶ Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, AT VI 18; see D’Agostino, *Spiritual Exercises and Early Modern Philosophy*, pp. 91-95.

⁶⁷ Locke, *Conduct*, par. 79, p. 230.

⁶⁸ Ibid., par. 79, pp. 230-31.

the philosopher starts from the observation that in adult persons, that is, those already provided with wide experience, the "Ideas we receive by sensation, are often [...] alter'd by the Judgment, without our taking notice of it".⁶⁹ Locke provides an example in the vision of a uniformly colored globe. What such an object impresses on the mind is the idea of a "flat Circle variously shadow', with several degrees of Light and Brightness coming to our Eyes",⁷⁰ meaning a two-dimensional color patch silhouetted against the background, endowed with a gradient variation of increasingly darker patches. Locke notes:

having by use been accustomed to perceive, what kind of appearance convex Bodies are wont to make in us; what alterations are made in the reflections of Light, by the difference of the sensible Figures of Bodies, the Judgment presently, by an habitual custom, alters the Appearances into their Causes.⁷¹

This transformation, from the appearance of a figure composed of a monochrome gradient patch into the perception of a convex figure endowed with uniform color, according to Locke is characterized by three essential elements: (a) it is an 'alteration'; (b) due to an 'instantaneous' movement, and (c) driven by a 'habitual' bias. Returning now to the text of the *Conduct*, firstly we should note that Locke proposes the example of a pictorial vision, in line with what was developed for Molyneux's problem, which makes it clear that it is at least possible to make the percipient aware that "one Idea is substituted for the other".⁷²

From this viewpoint, how can we understand Locke's suggested cure for an association of ideas that has already occurred? As we have seen, Locke does not offer much guidance other than to argue that we should "nicely observe" the rapid habitual movements of the mind. A text we find in *Essay* II.i.7 may help us. Here, Locke tries to explain why reflecting more or less on the inner operations of one's mind procures a greater or lesser variety of ideas of reflection. The reason is as follows:

For, though he that contemplates the Operations of his Mind, cannot but have plain and clear *Ideas* of them; yet unless he turn his Thoughts that way, and considers them *attentively*, he will no more have clear and distinct *Ideas* of all the *Operations of his Mind*, and all that may be observed therein, than he will have

⁶⁹ Locke, *Essay*, II.ix.8, p. 145.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Locke, *Conduct*, par. 79, p. 231.

all the particular *Ideas* of any Landscape, or of the Parts and Motions of a Clock, who will not turn his Eyes to it, and with attention heed all the Parts of it.⁷³

In explaining the inner, reflective action of observing the operations of one's mind, Locke emphasizes 'attention'.⁷⁴ Attention, understood here as the detailed observation of the object, is what enables the transition from confusion to clarity: "The Picture, or Clock may be so placed, that they may come in his way every day; but yet he will have but a confused *Idea* of all the Parts they are made up of, till he *applies himself with attention*, to consider them each in particular".⁷⁵ Attention (*prosoche*) is the most fundamental of the philosophical spiritual exercises developed by the ancient schools, in which it often had the therapeutic goal of keeping the philosopher in a state of constant tension and concentration on the fundamental rules of one's conduct, as on the present moment.⁷⁶ The kind of attention proposed here by Locke is a voluntary contemplative act, directed to the observation of every single detail of the object, resulting in the acquisition of a clearer and more distinct idea of it.

According to the *Conduct*, attention therapy for an association of ideas which has already occurred consists of a voluntary reflexive⁷⁷ act directed at perceiving those habitual movements that are normally difficult to observe in the internal activity of the mind, as they are very rapid and almost imperceptible. The qualification of these movements as 'imperceptible' emphasizes their passive nature, which attention seeks to counterbalance by active reflection. Therefore, it is not a matter of correcting the association of ideas through the contemplation of sane and correct ideas, as Kathryn Tabb rightly points out.⁷⁸ Instead, it is about acquiring a sort of mental habitus aimed at the careful observation of the habitual mechanisms which join ideas together. Continuing his argument, Locke polemically denounces those "learned who not seldom, in two Ideas that they have been accustomed to joyn in their mindes, substitute one for the other and I am apt to think often without perceiving it them selves".⁷⁹ Here, therefore, the Lockean solution goes in the direction of getting

⁷³ Locke, *Essay*, II.i.7, p. 107.

⁷⁴ For a general overview, see Stuart, "Locke on attention".

⁷⁵ Locke, *Essay*, II.i.7, p. 107.

⁷⁶ See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 84-85. On the phenomenon of mind-wandering and the role of attention according to Locke, see Stoneham and Thorson, "Locke on Cognitive Bias", pp. 99-100.

⁷⁷ See Lähteenmäki, "L'attention dans la philosophie de l'esprit de John Locke", pp. 84-86.

⁷⁸ See Tabb, "Locke on Habituation and the Association of Ideas", p. 391.

⁷⁹ Locke, *Conduct*, par. 79, p. 231.

used to perceiving what one does not usually perceive, that is, of performing associations that are dictated by habit and not by the nature of ideas themselves. It is important to point out that the focus here is not on the ideas, but on the habitual movement that goes with them.

In conclusion, for Locke, both in the case of preventing the association of ideas not yet occurred and in the case of cure for an association that has already occurred, it is a matter of forming a reflexive counter-habit in the mind, by meditative exercise in the one case and by attention in the other, which is capable of actively counterbalancing subjection to erroneous habitual bias.

Abbreviations

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- LL: Harrison, John, and Laslett, Peter, *The Library of John Locke*, 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971.

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